

Elementary School Garden in Belmont Feeds the Mind and the Body Through NC Fruits and Veggies Mini Grant

Gardens can be much more than pretty places on school campuses. They are outdoor classrooms that raise hope, spark imaginations and connect children – and communities – to nature in new and innovative ways.



Belmont Central Elementary School was awarded a 2009 NC Fruits and Veggies Mini Grant¹ to create an “Outdoor Pantry” and to introduce the Eat Smart Move More NC curricula to the students at the school. Belmont Central Elementary, located just west of Charlotte, educates 688 children, grades 2-5, but has rates of 67% of adults and 33% of children overweight or obese. So in partnership with the Gaston County Health Department, the City of Belmont and the local YMCA, the city has implemented the ACHIEVE program and coordinated with Belmont Central to start Safe Routes to School there. *Walk to School Wednesday* was the physical activity component of the program and was so successful that the search for increased



access to fruits and vegetables was begun to increase healthy eating school wide.

Adrian Miller, assistant city manager and school wellness committee member representing the city, sponsored the application for the \$1000 grant and on May 1, 2010, with support from principal, Sara

¹ The NC Fruits & Veggies Mini Grants were provided by the NC Fruits & Veggies Nutrition Coalition (www.fruitsandveggiesnc.com). The one-time funding used for sponsoring the grant came from revenue and sponsorships generated by the Coalition.

Moore, her staff and faculty and approximately 20 parents and students, constructed and filled eight raised beds. Three more beds were constructed three months later with funding from the Gaston County Cooperative Extension Program. Funds from the NC Fruits & Veggies Mini Grant were used to purchase planting soil, mushroom



compost, wooden planks and nails, seeds and seedlings, organic pest spray, tomato stands and child-size hand trowels for the children to use while gardening. With eleven beds, the cooperative extension had the capacity to implement their *Growing Healthy Children* program for the entire 3rd grade.

This Outdoor Pantry project had 3 components: the garden beds, 6 weeks of gardening classes taught by Gaston County Master Gardeners as well as 9 weeks of nutrition classes, and finally a display table in the cafeteria with guidelines for the children to take home any produce not eaten in the cafeteria that day. School gardens encourage a child's learning across subject matters and are shown to boost academic achievement, nurture healthy lifestyles, cultivate life skills and promote environmental stewardship. Allowing the produce to be taken home was an important additional benefit of the garden, however, as the school cafeteria only serves standard county-organized food and many of these students may not have access to fresh fruits and vegetables at home.

At the end of the semester, a final veggie harvest was enjoyed at the PTO evening meeting with a big salad celebration. The garden would continue growing, however, after the children had gone home for the summer, but Ms Moore, custodial staff, and Adrian Miller continued to water, harvest and make donations to Belmont Community Organization, the local food pantry. Adrian is hopeful that more efforts can be made to incorporate the surrounding neighborhood into the Outdoor Pantry as the garden was secured by a high wall and inaccessible to local residents.

This unique outdoor classroom was a great example of how gardens can be integrated into the educational curriculum to provide hands-on, experimental learning opportunities for elementary-aged children while increasing access and consumption of fresh fruits & veggies.

To contact the school directly about this new initiative, see its home page <http://www.gaston.k12.nc.us/schools/belmontcentral/Pages/welcome.aspx>, or Adrian Miller at amiller@cityofbelmont.org